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Rationale for Zahira's Paradise

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Zahra's Paradise

By Amir & Khalil

Published by First Second (2011)

Rationale by Hindi Krinsky, Brooklyn College, CUNY

Grade Level and Audience

This graphic novel is recommended for college-level readers in English, Comparative Literature, Political Science, History, and Media Studies classes.

Plot Summary

Zahra's Paradise provides a rich portrait of one Iranian family as they struggle to discover the fate of a family member who participated in Iran's Green Revolution. Less than two years ago, before the Arab Spring swept through the Middle East, millions of Iranians took to the streets to protest what was largely perceived as the fraudulent reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This work not only documents the very real repercussions of participating in that historical event, but also captures the complexities of modern Iranian society. In this way, the narrative is multilayered and fluidly intertwines the many voices, both past and present, of modern Iran. By capturing these different perspectives, the creators of Zahara's Paradise offer Western readers an authentic glimpse into an often misunderstood society, its ancient heritage, and unique culture.

The novel opens with a foreboding prologue, a meditation that provides readers with a visceral awareness of the cruelty Iranians, especially young Iranians, have been subjected to by their government. This tone remains constant throughout the work, a dark shadow that clouds any sense of hope or redemption. Each chapter of this dark political tale captures a moment in time, a date of a blog entry made by the narrator, Hassan on his pro-democracy blog called Zahra's Paradise. The plot is embedded in these blog entries, each documenting the struggles experienced by Hassan and his mother, Zahra, as they search for his Bob-Marley-loving-19-year-old brother Mehdi who has gone missing after the protests.

In their search for Mehdi, Hassan and Zahra look for him all over Tehran; they check Freedom Square (only to find a tragic lost shoe and stains of human blood), the hospital (where wounded protestors are dragged out of their beds and carted off to prison) and the morgue (where face after face of young protestor lies in contorted agony). Throughout their search, they encounter grieving mothers, obstructive bureaucrats, and violent Basij (Iran's paramilitary militia). Their numerous attempts to obtain information about Mehdi through diplomatic channels are completely unsuccessful as Hassan writes in his blog "people [are] vanishing before our eyes with no record, no paper trail, no name, no receipt- just a blur...this blog is all that is left of them." This theme of namelessness is repeatedly revisited throughout the work. In fact, one can view Zahra's Paradise, a work

of historical fiction, as an effort to name names, to match real identities and real lives to the common struggles experienced by the people of Iran. For example, while searching for Mehdi at Elvin Prison, the site where Iranian-Canadian photojournalist Zahra's Kazemi was beaten to death by an interrogating judge, a bystander remarks: "They think they can silence our women, beat our Zahras down or blot out her memory."

Unsuccessful at each junction, the duo eventually visits Behesht-e Zahra (Zahra's Paradise) a vast graveyard that is the final resting place of residents of Tehran, victims of the Iran-Iraq War, and the Basij's latest shooting targets: the young protestors.

Throughout the novel images of brutality and death are ironically juxtaposed with the symbols of daily religious life in Iran, offering sharp commentary on the religious zealotry of Iran's leadership that purports to be the "flagbearer of humanity" when in reality it "cannibalizes its young." One young protestor recounts to Hassan his brutal rape at Elvin, describing "I was raped! Raped in the name of their God, in the name of their Iran! Raped in the name of their prophet... It is their Islamic republic—not me—that is covered in filth!" This rejection of the mullahs is further emphasized by the deep and persistent clash between modern and traditional ways of life. For example, on a cab ride through the city, Hassan and Zahra drive by industrial cranes being used for public hangings. This image is deeply disturbing and is readily recalled when Hassan later comments that "our old kings used to gouge out our eyes. The new ones want to pull the plug on the Internet to obliterate our reflection."

Ultimately, the duo relies on the kindness of fellow Iranians to discover Mehdi's fate. These individuals are strangers who selflessly aide the Alavi family in their quest. This generosity of strangers illuminates the unity found among Iranians, their common resentment of the regime and their resistance to its acts of violence and terror. For example, in one chance encounter Hassan meets the flirtatious and bodacious Sepideh at a local internet café. She later discovers, after a night of passionate lovemaking, that her brutish (and married) lover is not only deeply involved with the regime, but may have information about Mehdi. At her own peril, she copies the cache of information right off his computer and sends it directly to Hassan. Enthused by this rare access to the inner workings of the regime, Hassan and his friends work tirelessly to decipher the data. In the process, they unveil the labyrinthine system of the Revolutionary Court, a monster of bureaucracy depicted as a pair of the mullahs' cavernous jaws outstretched to consume the incoming lines of helpless prisoners.

While working through this material, Hassan eventually discovers his brother's fate. Evidence of Mehdi's death is so significant to his family and friends, yet the entire episode is reduced to a nameless, faceless, and purposeless number. There is no reason offered. There is no story told. Mehdi is simply a number that has been deleted. The tragic nature of Mehdi's death resembles the experience of Holocaust victims, who like Mehdi are buried in forgotten mass graves, condemned to suffer not only the brutality of their senseless deaths, but an eternal loss of identity, a perpetual death of namelessness.

Fortunately, Mehdi is soon saved from suffering this fate. Again it is through the assistance of strangers that Hassan and Zahra manage to reclaim Mehdi's body from the

bowels of Behesht-e Zahra and give him a proper burial. Though the bureaucrats attempt to reframe Mehdi's death as an act of martyrdom, it is Zahra, who in her tremendous grief and sadness, martyrs her son, sacrificing Mehdi not to the iron jaws of the regime, but on the altar of freedom and resistance. In this way, Zahra gives Mehdi, a silent character throughout this text, a voice, a name, and ultimately, a cause. She urges him to "speak of the end of time, the end of life, speak of the end of Iran, the end of Islam! Speak that the world may know that all of Iran's sons have died and lie dead in you...for am I not Zahra, and is this not my paradise?"

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

Zahra's Paradise is a moving composite of social activism, political corruption, and daily life in modern-day Iran. Its strength is its ability to capture a complex and nuanced picture of Iranian society: its Western influences, Persian heritage, and Islamic traditions. This work is also structured around a popular anti-regime eponymously titled blog. In this way, the creators offer the reader insight into not only how technology has changed the general landscape of Iranian culture, but the potent power of social media to harness political struggle and even wage digital protest against the regime.

Possible Objections

There are several possible objections to Zahra's Paradise. In addition to the general depictions of horror and death, there is also a brutal rape scene and an explicit sexual encounter.

Ideas for Thematic Braidings

Like Zahra's Paradise there are a number of excellent texts that provide insight into modern Iranian life. For example, the award-winning graphic novel *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, Anahita Firouz's historical novel *In the Walled Gardens*, and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi. In addition to illuminating the richness of Persian culture, Zahra's Paradise is also a personal story, a "rage against the machine" epic that highlights the struggle of the common man against an inhumane and iron-fisted regime. This theme is reflected in many works of fiction, particularly science fiction, including Ray Bradbury's classic *Fahrenheit 451*, Margret Atwood's haunting *A Handmaid's Tale*, and Alan Moore's excellent graphic novel *V for Vendetta*. In its broad inclusion of many different Iranian voices and coverage of modern political events, Zahra's Paradise is also reminiscent of Joe Sacco's two landmark journalistic graphic novels, *Palestine* and *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia*. Zahra's Paradise also focuses on the struggle to redefine tradition in a modern age, to negotiate the chasm between the old and new worlds. There are many works that elucidate these intersections of meaning-making like Craig Thompson's *Habibi*, E.M. Forester's *A Passage to India*, and *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J.M. Coetzee.

Ideas for Implementation

Depending on the discipline and subject, there are a number of innovative ways to integrate *Zahra's Paradise* into a curricular program. One can use the latest current events in Iran (for example, its nuclear armament and economic sanctions) or news from the Middle East in general (for example, the Arab Spring, or the revolts in Syria) to springboard into the work. Or, one can take an entirely different approach and discuss the changing role of social media and how communication has evolved rapidly in the past few years. To explore this angle, one can show the viral video of 'Neda,' an anonymous Iranian girl dying in the streets of Tehran after being shot by the Basij during the Green Revolution. This powerful clip can then be used to situate *Zahra's Paradise* and discover how "the dreams of an entire generation fade behind the last flutterings of Neda's eyes."

Awards

[Nominated for an Eisner Award in the Best Digital Comic category](#)
[Publishers Weekly Best Comics title for 2011](#)
[Booklist Editors' Choice: Adult Books for Young Adults, 2011](#)
[A YALSA Great Graphic Novel for Teens – Top Ten](#)
[A *Graphic Novel Reporter* Best of 2011](#)
[A PW Best Book of the Year](#)
[A Booklist Top Ten Adult Graphic Novel of the Year](#)

Reviews

"A heartbreaking story...not just about tyranny, loss and grief, but a celebration of the will to live." -Azar Nafisi author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

"Like *Maus* and *Persepolis*...*Zahra's Paradise* puts a human face on a time of grief and unrest. Unlike those books, the time in question is now..." -NPR

"Gorgeous and compelling. *Zahra's Paradise* is more than a graphic novel. It is a testament to the unbreakable will of a people ready to bear any cost to shake off the yoke of oppression." -Reza Aslan, author of *No god but God*

Resources/References

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